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Volunteering: A Two-Way Street

Even though you're reading this in October and the Annual Meeting is but a distant memory, I'm writing this article a mere two weeks after returning from Denver and the exhilaration of another successful conference. Those of us who were fortunate enough to attend will agree that the setting and programming were excellent. The myriad of programs proffered—from the Private Law Libraries Summit to the Annual Meeting Program Committee-selected programs and the special interest section offerings—tempted attendees to set up camp in the convention center instead of the Rockies. But the best part of the Annual Meeting, for me at least, was the energy generated by having so many law librarians under one roof.

That energy creates some amazing instances of synchronicity that can only occur at the Annual Meeting. One of my favorite examples is a story from my colleague Gail Zwirner. At the time, Gail worked at a law firm and was doing research for a case involving the recovery of a treasure ship. Lacking experts in that area, the opposing party had listed a witness who was supposedly an expert in the allied area of "gold rushing." His CV included several publications dealing with that subject but Gail was unable to locate any of these publications anywhere.

So off Gail went to the Annual Meeting held that year in Reno, Nevada. In between sessions, she took advantage of a side trip—a tour of Virginia City. She couldn't resist the lure of exploring the Virginia City Library. Imagine her surprise when she found a table full of brochures in the lobby, all devoted to the subject of gold-rushing and all authored by the expert witness.

Now that may be an extreme case of synchronicity but I'm sure all of us know of a colleague who "just happened" into a program, a committee meeting, or casual conversation that provided information that was invaluable in his or her work life. Maybe you've even experienced it yourself.

The best part of the Annual Meeting, for me at least, was the energy generated by having so many law librarians under one roof.

My instance of synchronicity at the Denver meeting was not nearly as dramatic as my friend's but it was interesting, at least to me. Part of the Conference of Newer Law Librarians (CONELL) program involves members of the Executive Board meeting with small groups of CONELL participants. I was surprised to discover that I had traveled over 1,500 miles to meet Ben Keele, a young man who was about to begin work as a reference librarian at William and Mary—an institution located less than 50 miles down the road from me. After our group had chatted for 20 minutes or so about AALL, career goals, and volunteer work, it was Ben who asked me a thought-provoking question: Did I plan—or in other words, was it my goal—to become president of AALL? And if so, how did I achieve that goal?

I had a hard time answering that question. I could honestly say that no, I had never envisioned myself as president of AALL. So, how did I end up here?

Part of the reason is that I'm something like Ado Annie, the girl who can't say no. I was part of a group of librarians in Richmond who semi-regularly lunched together. Someone suggested that we should become a formal group and institute bylaws.

"Yeah," I said. "I can help with that." The next thing I know, I'm at a meeting introducing the newly elected president of the Richmond Association of Law Libraries.

Sometime later, I received a phone call asking if I would be willing to lead a discussion forum at the Southeastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries (SEAALL) annual meeting. "Yeah," I said. "I can do that." The next thing I know, I'm researching online serial control systems.

While reading the *Technical Services Law Librarian*, I came across a call for volunteers to write articles. "Yeah," I said. "I can do that." The next thing I know, I'm the acquisitions columnist.

I attended the Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section Middle Managers Breakfast one year. At the conclusion of the meeting, the organizers said they needed a volunteer to organize next year's breakfast. "Yeah," I said. "I can do that." The next thing I know...as you can imagine, the list goes

on and on—all because I was willing to volunteer when someone asked for help.

My experience within AALL shows the importance of volunteer work on all levels, not just national. Being involved with my chapters, both local and regional, and my special interest sections along with AALL allowed me to build a record of volunteer service.

Volunteerism is at the heart of all of our professional organizations. Starting at the chapter or special interest section level allows you to hone your skills and prove that you are a reliable volunteer.

Showing you are a reliable volunteer locally guarantees that you will have opportunities to serve nationally. Volunteering will also help you expand your network of colleagues—colleagues who will be able to speak confidently about your abilities and who will be more than willing to help you as you have helped them and the profession.

Volunteerism is a two-way street. As much as it benefits the profession, it also benefits you as a person and as an employee. It allowed me to build my skill set—to stretch my wings, so to speak, by working on projects outside my area of day-to-day responsibility. It made me a more valuable employee to my organization and a more capable volunteer. The friends I have made along the way have made me a better person.

"Yeah," I said. "I can do that."

Over the past few months, the chairs of the various special interest sections and the presidents of many chapters have been putting out calls for volunteers. Many of them are still looking for help. This month, vice president Darcy Kirk will call for volunteers for AALL committees. When she does, fill out the form. Say, "Yeah, I can do that." The next thing you know, you may be running for president of AALL. ■

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